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**Nature as Healer: Ecological Beauty, Resilience, and Renewal in Helon Habila's
Oil on Water**

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Abstract

This study examines nature as healer in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, with particular attention to ecological beauty, resilience, renewal, and the restorative relationships between humans and the nonhuman environment. Existing scholarship on the novel has extensively examined petroleum extraction, environmental degradation, militancy, aquatic agency, ecological advocacy, journalism, and decolonial repair (Egya; Hand; Pirzadeh; Ogungbemi; Karmakar). However, comparatively less attention has been given to how Habila's representation of natural beauty and ecological persistence creates possibilities for psychological, spiritual, cultural, and relational healing. The study addresses this gap by asking how nature operates not merely as a victim of oil exploitation but as an active presence capable of sustaining memory, belonging, ethical awareness, and provisional renewal. The research adopts a qualitative close-reading methodology. Eco-aesthetics, grounded in Lawrence Buell's environmental imagination, constitutes the major theoretical framework, while Cajetan Iheka's aesthetics of proximity and Rob Nixon's slow violence serve as supporting concepts. The paper argues that Habila has created an environmental aesthetic in which beauty makes ecological value perceptible, resilience keeps possibilities of renewal open, and sacred natural spaces facilitate emotional and spiritual restoration. It contributes to the ongoing discourse on environmental politics in literature.

Keywords; Nature as healer, Eco-aesthetics, Resilience, Oil on Water, Ecological beauty

Introduction

Nigeria's environmental history is closely connected to the extraction, circulation, and commercialisation of natural resources. The Niger Delta provides one of the clearest contemporary examples of the contradiction between resource wealth and ecological insecurity. Petroleum extraction has generated substantial national revenue while producing damaged farmland, polluted waterways, declining fisheries, disrupted livelihoods, and uneven development. The study notes that recent environmental research continues to document serious consequences for land, food systems, and community health (Gbadamosi and Aldstadt 351). These conditions demonstrate that environmental degradation cannot be reduced to pollution alone. It is also connected to economic structures, technological practices, political decisions, land ownership, and unequal distributions of benefit and harm.

The literary representation of this history is especially important because environmental violence is often gradual and normalised. Nigerian environmental writing has long challenged that normalisation. Ken Saro-Wiwa's environmental activism and writing connected the destruction of land and water in Ogoniland to livelihood, cultural survival, political marginalisation, and corporate exploitation. Sule Egya similarly situates Nigerian environmental literature within a tradition of social and political engagement in which literature can confront ecological injury rather than treating nature as an isolated aesthetic object (Nature 60–64). This tradition establishes an important context for Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*.

Abba argues that ecological precarity, the vulnerability produced by oil conflict, drives eco-activism and enables Niger Delta writing to resist the conversion of the region into a 'sacrifice zone' (1–4). This perspective is central to a reading of *Oil on Water* because it prevents the language of beauty and healing from being separated from the material conditions that make

ecological repair necessary. If communities bear poisoned water, damaged soil, poverty, and health risks so that petroleum can continue to signify national progress, natural beauty becomes part of an ethical struggle over what is valued, what is allowed to disappear, and whose suffering becomes visible. Abba's argument therefore strengthens the claim that Habila presents nature as wounded but not powerless: the environment remains capable of sustaining memory, perception, relation, and renewal, but these capacities exist within structures of ecological precarity.

Much of the criticism of *Oil on Water* understandably concentrates on this destructive dimension. Iortyer and Ntamu examine environmental degradation, corruption, and militancy (19–24). Egya reads the novel through literary militancy and its confrontation with the destruction of the Niger Delta (94–104). Hand identifies the landscape as an important actor within the novel's conflicts (107–20). Pirzadeh examines neoliberal extraction and aquatic resistance (513–24). Ogungbemi focuses on metaphor, evaluative language, narrative perspective, and ecological advocacy (360–70). Karmakar extends the discussion towards decolonial repair, epistemic inequality, and petrostate violence (106–24). Anasiudu further complicates the idea of realism by showing how the novel organises evidence, uncertainty, and attention rather than functioning as transparent documentary reporting (19–33).

This study shifts the emphasis from environmental violence alone to the question of **nature as healer**. The concept does not suggest that nature magically cures environmental or political problems. Rather, it examines the ways the natural environment provides material, emotional, spiritual, cultural, and relational possibilities for recovery. Nature becomes a healer when it provides a space for memory, belonging, reflection, ritual, and renewed ecological responsibility. The concept is particularly important in the Irikefe episode, where the river and surrounding

sacred landscape become connected to ancestral memory, ritual practice, hospitality, and Boma's eventual declaration that her "spirit feels settled" (Habila 169).

The argument is grounded in eco-aesthetics. The supplied dissertation defines eco-aesthetics as the ways literary form organises environmental perception and directs ethical attention. It includes beauty but is not limited to pleasant description; smell, ugliness, silence, restricted vision, bodily discomfort, rhythm, metaphor, and focalisation can all shape environmental experience. Buell's environmental imagination is central because it encourages reading the nonhuman environment as more than background (7–8). Iheka's aesthetics of proximity helps explain how humans, animals, plants, water, soil, and material processes are brought into relational contact.

Literature Review

Ecocriticism developed partly as a challenge to literary criticism that treated nature primarily as setting. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xviii). For African literature, however, environmental criticism requires historical and political specificity. Huggan and Tiffin argue that postcolonial ecological questions cannot be detached from colonial histories, extractive economies, unequal ownership, and the reorganisation of land and labour for external profit (11). This is particularly relevant to the Niger Delta because its waterways and land are simultaneously ecological spaces, cultural environments, economic resources, and politically contested territories.

Miller similarly emphasises the connection between environmental conservation and social justice (479–90). This perspective is important for reading *Oil on Water* because the novel does not present environmental degradation as a purely natural process. Oil pollution is connected to corporations, state institutions, military force, local political structures, and unequal access to resources. The environmental crisis is consequently a crisis of power as well as ecology.

Egya's *Nature, Environment, and Activism in Nigerian Literature* establishes another important context. He argues that Nigerian environmental writing participates in public struggle by making ecological injury visible and confronting the institutions that normalise it (11–17). His related concept of literary militancy shows how Nigerian writers use confrontational language to resist environmental injustice (“Literary Militancy” 94–104). This perspective is important for *Oil on Water*, but it does not exhaust the novel's environmental force. Habila also works through hesitation, uncertainty, beauty, memory, bodily discomfort, ritual, and provisional care.

Research specifically on *Oil on Water* confirms its importance as an environmental novel. Iortyer and Ntamu connect environmental degradation to corruption and militancy, while resisting a simple opposition between innocent communities and one external enemy (19–24). Egya reads Habila's narrative as a form of literary militancy directed against the systematic destruction of the Delta and its inhabitants (94–104). Hand's analysis is particularly significant because she identifies the Niger Delta landscape as a fourth actor in conflicts otherwise dominated by soldiers, militants, and villagers (107–20). Her approach helps shift attention towards the agency and material pressure of the natural environment.

Pirzadeh reads the riverine world through neoliberal extraction and aquatic resistance, linking the local crisis to wider structures of capitalism (513–24). This is useful for the present study because water in Habila's novel possesses both aesthetic and material significance. It is beautiful, but it is also polluted; it carries people, memories, fish, oil, and political conflict.

Ogungbemi's study of ecological advocacy focuses on metaphor, evaluative vocabulary, and narrative perspective (360–70). His attention to language supports the present study's emphasis on diction, imagery, metaphor, and sensory form. The difference is that this research places those linguistic features specifically within an argument about nature's beauty, resilience, and healing.

Abba's study of petroculture is especially relevant because it places ecological precarity and eco-activism at the centre of Niger Delta literary expression. He describes the region as a 'sacrifice zone', naming the unequal distribution of environmental benefit and environmental harm (1–4). He also describes literature as an 'artistic trench' for eco-activism when aesthetic form challenges extractive narratives rather than merely displaying damaged landscapes (2). For *Oil on Water*, this insight means that mist, polluted water, dying vegetation, abandoned settlements, and gas flares are not decorative images. They organize a struggle over attention. Beauty can draw the reader toward an endangered environment, but its political force depends on whether the scene returns attention to the histories, communities, and institutions responsible for the damage. Abba thus provides a bridge between eco-aesthetic perception and environmental activism.

Theoretical Framework

This study establishes **eco-aesthetics** as a vital literary framework that organizes environmental perception and directs ethical attention. Instead of treating nature as a passive backdrop for human action, it uses **Lawrence Buell's environmental imagination** to elevate the Niger Delta's rivers, mangroves, and wildlife into active narrative participants with deep ethical value (7–8). This perspective is deepened through **Arnold Berleant's environmental aesthetics**, which rejects detached spectatorship in favour of active sensory engagement (3). The novel demonstrates this through Rufus's intense bodily struggles with hunger, cold, and nausea, preventing the reader from viewing the damaged ecosystem from a safe, comfortable distance.

To fully map out these human-nature relationships, the framework incorporates three supporting ecological concepts. **Cajetan Iheka's aesthetics of proximity** explores the

physical, inescapable ties connecting human bodies to nonhuman life and toxic materials, showing how a single polluted water source harms villagers, fish, and plants alike. **Rob Nixon's** **concept of slow violence** provides a crucial temporal dimension, explaining how the gradual, dispersed accumulation of oil contamination and displacement over time creates a history of damage that cannot be reduced to a single dramatic event (2). Finally, **Wangari Maathai's environmental thought** adds a restorative dimension, connecting ecological healing to active community stewardship while carefully warning that basic human or natural resilience should never be confused with structural justice.

Analysis: Nature as Beauty and Ecological Presence in *Oil on Water*

Habila establishes the beauty of nature from the opening pages of *Oil on Water*. Rufus observes that the sky, water, and dense foliage become visually indistinguishable: "blue and green and blue-green misty" (Habla 2). The phrase is aesthetically powerful because it merges different environmental elements into one field. Sky, water, and vegetation appear interconnected rather than isolated. The repetition of colour is significant. "Blue and green and blue-green" slows perception and creates visual harmony. From an eco-aesthetic perspective, the description establishes the environment as an integrated presence. The landscape is not simply something Rufus looks at; it becomes a perceptual field in which distinctions between elements are temporarily blurred.

Yet Habla immediately destabilises the beauty: "The whole landscape was now a mere trick of light, vaporous and shape-shifting, appearing and disappearing behind the fog" (Habla 2). The words "trick," "vaporous," and "shape-shifting" deny the observer complete mastery. Beauty does not equal knowledge. The environment can be attractive while remaining uncertain.

This is important to Buell's environmental imagination. If the environment is ethically significant, then the observer cannot assume that visual attraction grants ownership or comprehension. Rufus's experience demonstrates that being physically present in nature does not automatically mean understanding it. His body is immersed in the landscape, but his knowledge remains incomplete.

The mist also contributes to the novel's representation of nature as powerful. It controls vision. It determines what Rufus can and cannot see. It becomes part of the narrative structure because the journey is shaped by restricted perception. Nature therefore exerts narrative pressure.

However, Habila complicates this beauty through the scene involving the fishing children. Rufus photographs them against the sunset.

Water is the central element through which Habila develops the contradiction between nature's life-giving power and environmental violence. The title, 'Oil on Water', establishes this contradiction before the narrative begins. Water represents life, movement, livelihood, memory, and spiritual connection, while oil represents extraction and contamination.

The polluted well provides one of the novel's strongest examples of the destruction of nature's healing potential. Rufus approaches the communal well thirsty, expecting water to provide relief, but instead: "A rank smell wafted from its hot depths and slapped my face; I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter. Something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil" (Habila 6).

The verb "slapped" makes smell physical. Odour becomes an act of violence. Rufus does not merely observe pollution; he experiences it through his body. This is aesthetics of proximity in action. Human body, polluted water, decomposing organic matter, and petroleum occupy the same sensory field.

The uncertainty of “perhaps human” is also important. Habila refuses to provide a neat symbolic explanation. The well becomes a convergence of life, death, thirst, and oil. Nature’s ordinary function has been reversed. Instead of sustaining the body, water produces pain.

The river itself becomes increasingly silent. Rufus observes “black, expressionless water” and notices “no birds or fish or other water creatures”; consequently, “we were alone” (Habila 7). The absence of nonhuman life produces human loneliness. Birds and fish are not merely decorative elements that would make the scene prettier. Their disappearance changes the ecological meaning of the river.

This is precisely where Iheka’s aesthetics of proximity becomes useful. The novel makes human and nonhuman conditions perceptible within the same environment. The death of fish affects human livelihood; the absence of birds changes perception; polluted water changes bodily behaviour. Nature is therefore relational.

The reversal is ethically significant. A communal well normally represents shared life. It is a source of drinking, hospitality, labour, and community. Here it becomes a site of exclusion. Rufus can leave; those whose lives depend upon the environment cannot simply withdraw.

Ecological resilience in *Oil on Water* is represented through the continued presence of nonhuman life within damaged environments. Habila’s treatment of vegetation and animals does not romanticise nature. Instead, it shows life under pressure.

The mangroves are particularly important. Their roots are described as “gasping for air” (Habila 5). The metaphor makes the ecological stress of pollution intelligible through the language of breathing. Human readers can imagine the loss of oxygen and therefore perceive the damage to plant life.

The grass near the polluted well is “suffocated by a film of oil,” with blades marked like the fingers of a long-term smoker (Habla 6). The comparison connects plant injury with human illness. It does not claim that plants and humans experience suffering identically; rather, it establishes a relational vocabulary. The oil moves through different forms of life.

Maathai’s restorative perspective is useful here. Ecological care requires active relationships, community participation, and sustained work. Nature’s resilience should therefore be understood as an invitation to restoration rather than an excuse for continued damage.

The abandoned villages demonstrate why resilience alone is insufficient. One settlement is described as looking “as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it,” with an oil-drilling platform dominating the centre “like some sacrificial altar” (Habla 5). The epidemic metaphor makes environmental destruction appear systematic rather than accidental.

The “sacrificial altar” metaphor is particularly important. It suggests that the village has been offered for the benefit of others. Environmental destruction is therefore connected to unequal distributions of value. The community bears the cost while distant beneficiaries receive the economic rewards.

Yet the description of drilling equipment “sprouting” from widening cracks introduces an unsettling image of pseudo-renewal. “Sprouting” normally suggests vegetation and life. Here machinery appears to grow from damaged concrete. Industrial infrastructure imitates organic growth while producing ecological decline.

The gas flare represents one of the most complex relationships between beauty and environmental destruction. Habla does not portray the flare as simply ugly. Its visual power helps explain why communities might desire what oil extraction appears to promise.

Chief Ibiram observes the flare burning over the neighbouring village: “its flame long and coiled like a snake, whispering, winking, hissing” (Habila 29). The image gives the flame a seductive personality. “Whispering” suggests persuasion; “winking” suggests invitation or promise; “hissing” retains danger.

Abba’s concept of the ‘sacrifice zone’ deepens the interpretation of Habila’s abandoned village. The village is not simply a beautiful ruin or empty landscape; it is a place whose existing forms of life have been made expendable within petroleum extraction (Abba 4–5). Habila’s image of a ‘community of ghosts’ therefore carries political as well as aesthetic force (*Oil on Water* 6). The image compresses memory, absence, and attachment, but its ethical significance lies in what it refuses to let the reader forget: people have been displaced from a place that once sustained communal life. Abba’s argument also clarifies the gas flare. Its brightness can signify development while the contaminated environment around it reveals the unequal costs of that promise. Beauty is double-edged: it may make violence perceptible, but it can also aestheticize the infrastructure through which violence is produced.

Chief Malabo exposes the contradiction: “Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines” (Habila 29). The word “grew” is particularly striking. Industrial infrastructure is given the vocabulary of natural growth, but what grows no longer sustains life.

The phrase “only gas flares and pipelines” establishes an anti-harvest. Land that once produced food and livelihood now produces the material signs of extraction. This is not renewal but replacement.

Beauty therefore becomes part of the politics of consent. The flare is visually compelling, but its aesthetic attraction is connected to an economic system that transforms land and water.

The strongest representation of nature as healer occurs at Irikefe. Here Habila moves beyond the representation of environmental destruction towards a complex relationship among nature, spirituality, memory, community, and emotional restoration.

The Irikefe shrine is not simply a beautiful landscape. It is a place where ecological and cultural relationships are performed. The description of the ancestral figures and river ritual is especially important:

These figures represent the ancestors watching over us. They face the east, to acknowledge the beauty of the sun rising, for without the sun there would be no life. And some face the west, to show the dying sun the way home, and to welcome the moon. And each day the worshippers go in a procession to the river, to bathe in it, to cry to it, and to promise never to abominate it ever again. (Habila 91)

This passage provides a direct connection between beauty and life. The sun is beautiful, but its beauty is understood through its material importance: “without the sun there would be no life.”

Aesthetic appreciation is therefore connected to ecological dependence.

The procession to the river is particularly significant. The verbs “bathe,” “cry,” and “promise” move from bodily contact to emotional expression and ethical commitment. Nature becomes a participant in healing. The community enters the river, mourns before it, and promises renewed respect.

The ritual should not, however, be interpreted as a magical solution to pollution. The promise never to “abominate” the river could risk placing responsibility entirely on the community, while corporations, government institutions, and extractive systems remain responsible for much of the environmental damage.

Boma’s experience at Irikefe provides the clearest personal expression of healing. She tells Rufus, “My spirit feels settled” (Habila 169). The sentence is deliberately modest. Boma does not say

that the Delta has been healed. She does not claim that the past has disappeared. She describes an internal condition of settlement.

The word “spirit” connects healing to identity and belonging. Boma has experienced displacement, violence, and fragmentation. Irikefe provides a place where she can remain. The natural and sacred environment therefore becomes a condition for psychological restoration.

This is one of the most significant contributions of reading *Oil on Water* through nature as healer. Environmental damage does not only destroy physical resources. It also disrupts people’s relationships with place. Healing therefore requires some recovery of belonging.

Nature in *Oil on Water* also functions as an archive. The environment preserves traces of ecological and social history even when institutions fail to preserve the experiences of affected communities.

The abandoned village is a particularly strong example. The guide answers Rufus’s question about who lives there with “Nobody” (Habla 5). Yet the village contains houses, oil equipment, domestic utensils, animal remains, and other evidence that people once lived there.

The word “Nobody” therefore becomes inadequate. The village is not empty because it never contained life; it is empty because life has been displaced. The landscape preserves that distinction. The village appears “as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it,” while the oil-drilling equipment appears to be “sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete” (Habla 5). The landscape records both destruction and industrial presence.

The official oil-well sign records “OIL WELL NO. 2. 1999. 15,000 METERS” (Habla 5). It preserves technical information with precision, but it does not record the human and nonhuman consequences surrounding the well.

Rufus's photography attempts to create another archive. He moves through the village "taking pictures" and hoping for "one survivor, one voice to interview" (Habla 5). Yet the novel remains sceptical of photography as complete evidence. A photograph can preserve a surface, but it cannot restore the authority of displaced people.

Nature's healing power can be connected to this archival function. Healing requires memory. If environmental destruction is forgotten, the possibility of restoration weakens. By preserving traces of ecological life, the environment enables mourning and recognition.

The second settlement appears "almost a replica of the last," with "the same" dwellings, barrenness, stench, and oil slick (Habla 6). Repetition establishes a pattern. Environmental violence is not a single accident. It is reproduced across places.

Oil on Water highlights the clear boundaries of nature's healing capacity, demonstrating that personal, spiritual healing does not equal total ecological recovery. While the character Boma finds a sense of personal peace at Irikefe, the surrounding Niger Delta remains deeply scarred, with gas flares continuously polluting the horizon. Rufus's observations emphasize this grim reality, as he uses the metaphor of a "hangman's noose" to describe how spreading oil suffocates local life-forms. This structural damage shows that individual renewal and broad environmental justice exist in constant tension, refusing to offer readers a simple or romanticized happy ending.

The text also complicates the idea of resistance by showing that sabotage against oil corporations carries severe environmental consequences of its own. Spectacular fires and massive oil spills caused by militant actions ultimately tighten the ecological noose around nonhuman life. By highlighting these messy realities, Habla moves past a simple division of good activists versus bad corporations, forcing readers to question whether actions done in the name of justice are truly accountable to the ecosystem.

In essence, true ecological renewal demands sustained human labour, collective responsibility, and institutional accountability. Wangari Maathai's environmental thought helps clarify that nature's resilience is not a passive cure-all, and local communities should not carry the unfair burden of repairing damage caused by massive global economic systems. Instead, the persistent survival of nature serves as an ethical call to action, proving that while natural beauty can capture human attention, that attention must actively transform into long-term systemic care and protection.

Conclusion

This study analyses Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* through the lens of eco-aesthetics, arguing that the novel portrays nature not just as a victim of environmental destruction, but as a resilient, beautiful healer capable of fostering psychological and spiritual renewal. While existing scholarships focus on petro-politics, ecological violence, and militancy, this research shifts the conversation toward what remains possible within a wounded environment. Utilizing Lawrence Buell's environmental imagination and Lawrence Iheka's aesthetics of proximity, the framework treats the Niger Delta's river, vegetation, and wildlife as active narrative participants rather than mere background scenery. It also incorporates Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence alongside Wangari Maathai's restorative environmental thought to examine how healing operates as an act of sustained care over time amid long-term environmental degradation.

The textual analysis reveals that natural beauty and local ecological knowledge work together to create a powerful ethical awareness in the narrative. Initial descriptions of the misty, shape-shifting landscape capture the reader's attention, while the persistent image of a rising sun symbolizes continuity and nature's enduring resilience despite severe pollution. However, this aesthetic beauty is constantly challenged by the lived realities of the characters, such as children

noting the absence of crabs due to poor water quality, which grounds the environmental perception in material truth. Ultimately, elements like the polluted well reverse the traditional life-giving role of water, using an aesthetics of proximity to connect oil contamination directly to human vulnerability, bodily discomfort, and the urgent need for ecological responsibility.

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